

## 1. Crossed Perspectives



# What are the effects of the acceleration of social rhythms?

Between Hartmut Rosa (Sociologue)  
And Michel Lussault (Géographe)

31 March 2014

If they agree on the reality of an acceleration of social processes, the German sociologist Hartmut Rosa and the French Geographer Michel Lussault strongly disagree on the sustained importance of space and its effects – either good or bad – for our societies.

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## 01. Are our post-modern societies characterised more by the acceleration of time or by the advent of a unified, globalised world?



Hartmut Rosa

I think this is not an either-or question: It is the former which brings about the latter! When we think of Globalization, what do we mean? We do not mean the fact that people, or goods, or diseases can travel around the world, for they have always done so, or at least: They have done so for a long time. But the fact that money and images and ideas can do so within fractions of seconds, and goods and people can move around globally without much effort or costs at very high speeds: This is new! Thus, it is the acceleration of social, communicative, technical and economic processes which has brought about a 'globalized' world.



M. L

I agree with the idea that one of the key aspects of our contemporary era is the exponential growth in what I call our 'digital life', i.e. the fact that more and more areas of daily life involve digital technology. We probably haven't really understood the full impact of this change yet in our societies and our space.

However, it would be wrong to reduce this analysis to a simple question of acceleration. This is clearly visible and its effects are tangible, but a detailed empirical analysis of both individual and societal temporalities reveals the sheer diversity of both the rhythms and the speeds created and exhibited by the principal actors. And this is without raising the question of renewed interest in life in the slow lane (and its corresponding spatial element of local life).



Michel Lussault

I'm not sure that our societies can be described as post-modern, mainly because of the very nature of the world we live in; i.e. a social space on a planetary scale which is no longer ruled by the empire of modernity - as it was once promoted in European ideology.

It's not that we have entered a 'post' period, it's that we've arrived at a place that's 'elsewhere'; we're living in another register of human habitation of the planet. It follows a

widespread urbanisation of the world that I believe will continue until around 2050, and that turns whole cultures and their notions of decorum upside down.

However, it would be wrong to see such a transformation as something that is uniform, the result of legislation and that is being pursued with a specific purpose. The urbanisation of the world is uncontrolled – and probably hard to control anyway. It offers space-time in an infinite number of varieties. It's impossible to believe that the world is unified – other than when it is viewed as an object from a great height. But if it's examined from within, and seen as a process of transformation of human habitation, it's clear that differentiation rather than unification is the rule.



H. R

I agree that we should rather not talk of post-modernity. For me, social acceleration lies at the heart of modernity, it is the core of modernization. Since the process of acceleration is still going on, we still live in modernity. But it is a new kind or version of modernity: While in classical modernity, human subjects individually and collectively set the world in motion in order to increase autonomy and control, in late-modernity, as I call it, the world has become too fast for autonomy: Individually, we can no longer develop something like a stable individual identity or a life-plan, for the conditions of our lives change too rapidly. Politically, democracy is no longer the pace-maker of social change: Democratic will-formation is too time-consuming and slow, and therefore, politics has shifted to a re-active form of 'muddling through': It has to react to the problems and crises brought about by economic or technological events.

Whether late-modernity and globalization are processes that create global homogeneity or global heterogeneity is difficult to judge. It seems that this is a matter of belief and credo: Some observers see homogenization everywhere, while others, like Lussault, perceive increasing differences. Seen from a temporal perspective, the unifying and homogenizing tendencies certainly are stronger than the counterforces.

## **02. What are the consequences of this acceleration for the movement of people, objects and information in our society?**



Hartmut Rosa

The consequences are manifold, and it is certainly interesting to think about them in terms of the consequences for space and time. Social Acceleration, in my view, is a change of both: time and space, therefore, we could and should talk of a change in the time-space regime. But I think that despite the term ('globalization'), the main motor is changes in the temporal dimension: Our perception of space is transformed because we speed up the way we use it. In many respects, space is perceived in terms of the time in needs to cross it. How far is it to travel from Paris to New York? We might ask and get the

answer: Four weeks, or ten days (in the age of ships) – or: eight hours by plane, seconds via Skype. This is the sense in which space appears to be ‘annihilated’ by time. If we travel today, the problem is not space, but time: We worry about connections and schedules, not about mountains and deserts.

Nevertheless, social acceleration has does have its problematic consequences, for social processes have become too fast for the world ‘above’ society – the eco-spheres, which cannot reproduce forests or fish or raw-materials fast enough for our consumption, and for the world ‘below’ us: The psycho-sphere, where people suffer from ‘burnout’ in record-numbers. The high speed of economic transactions, technological developments and social change is also too fast for politics: Democracy is a time-consuming process, and the faster and more complex the world is, the more time democratic decision-making needs to be completed. Hence, we approach the age of post-democracy, where politics is no longer shaping society, but only reacting to events occurring in the fast lane.



M. L

As a geographer, my analysis naturally leads me to different conclusions to those reached by Hartmut Rosa. For me, the effects of acceleration on human space and spatialities are counter-intuitive. Far from being annihilated, time and space have never been so important – to the extent that we can even ask ourselves whether we are not living through a spatial turning point in our societies. In other words, is this the moment when the spatialisation of social realities becomes essential for defining ‘co-habitation’ by individuals in a society?

Meanwhile, it seems to me that the physical mobility of goods and people now has a settled rhythm: it is continuing to grow steadily, but not excessively, and the race for pure speed seems to have ended. Today, the gains to be made in terms of journey times have a lot more to do with improving logistics and the reliability of the route – rather than any spectacular increases in raw speed. On the other hand, as far as non-physical mobility is concerned, we are living through a period of explosive growth in digital telecommunications, which now affect all aspects of life in a society.

While physical mobility is a mature aspect of social organisation and daily life, the increasingly widespread telecommunications and hyperspatiality are new guiding principles. Digital technology now provides the basis for changes in temporal and spatial cultures – just as transport used to in the past.



Michel Lussault

The consequences of this globalisation movement are clearly considerable, but none of them indicate that space will cease to be important for organising the lives of individuals or entire societies. In fact, I think that the more mobility asserts itself, the more that social

rhythms become social issues and the more that digital life becomes an intrinsic part of our existence – so the organisation and the uses of space (which I call spatialities) become essential.

Speed and acceleration have not therefore annihilated space, but have made people's way of life and the way they cohabit a great deal more complex. For every contemporary, mobile and connected individual, whether he or she wants it or not, the space-time experience of daily life has become an 'ordeal' that demands a considerable amount of energy. This is how I analyse the basic skills of spatiality that are required of social actors if they are to achieve their aims and cohabit successfully with one another.



H. R

I am not so sure that mobility 'asserts' itself or increases. Rather, it seems to me that Paul Virilio might be right after all: After the transport-revolution, which made us move across earth, came the transmission-revolution, which brought the world to us through data-streams, right into our living-rooms and onto our screens, – and it will be followed by the transplant-revolution, which has already started: We will pimp our brains and sensory receptors with electronics and pharmaceuticals to deal with all those streams. In the end, physical transportation of bodies will be too slow: We will become inert, while the flows of data and materials endlessly float around us. In this state, space really does not matter much any more.

### **03. Can we control this frenzied nature/acceleration of our world, or are we heading irretrievably to catastrophe?**



Hartmut Rosa

This is not easy to answer. In my view, there is one central idea in modernity, one great human promise: That we do not accept any limitations imposed on us by social powers: We do not accept the church, or the king, to tell us what to do, we even strive to overcome the limitations imposed on us by nature: We decide whether it is light or dark in our room, and we decide whether it is hot or cold there – irrespective of what the weather and daytime is out there. We even decide on whether we'll eat strawberries or bananas or pineapples.

So, why should we accept the domination of a social law – the law of acceleration – which was imposed on us by ourselves, even though inadvertently? Basically, I only see two possible futures: Either we will have to completely overhaul our human bodies and psyche and become 'transhumanist': Computers fused with brains in bodies fully geared up pharmaceutically and technologically. Or we remember the great promise of freedom and autonomy which is the promise and the dream of modernity: The ideal of self-rule. Even though it is hard to see how we could come to re-gain control over the runaway world

when democracy as we know it is no longer the tool to work with, I a sociologist am bent to stick to the second solution: The problem is man-made, so it can be solved by man. What we need for this is an economic revolution that takes us beyond capitalism, a political revolution that introduces something like a basic income, and a philosophical revolution that redefines our conception of the good life.



M. L

Like Hartmut Rosa, I believe we need to think about new ways of imagining 'the good life', and what I call the new order of 'co-habitation' among individuals. But I think that needs to be based on a real understanding of temporal and spatial cultures in today's urbanised world, rather than a simple rejection of them. It seems to me that there is a danger of appearing to deal with the problems associated with the vulnerability of contemporary societies, but in fact promoting conservative – if not reactionary – ideas that simply recycle outdated values.

Seen from Europe, globalisation is a concern. This concern mainly reflects a feeling that our traditional intellectual contexts are no longer relevant when it comes to dealing with situations we find ourselves in today. So I'm quite in favour of inventing new theories and new ways of living – based on recognising the right to mobility, and the importance of digital life – as well as new modes or relationship between the human and non-human, and a concern for the environment.



Michel Lussault

Every day, we are certainly rediscovering//discovering a little more about how the spatial systems being created by urbanisation are both increasingly powerful and increasingly vulnerable. This vulnerability isn't just environmental, but is also social, economic, political and technological. The questions raised by global change are playing a big part in making people realise that our supposed powers are actually quite fragile.

Given this situation, I think it's important that the question of cohabitation, at every level, returns to the heart of the debate. Collectively, we have to reinvent ways of 'living together' that make the world habitable for everyone. To achieve that, we will need all the resources we can draw on, and particularly that infinitely renewable resource – human thought and creativity. The times in which we live are not the end (of the story), but are instead a new moment, when anything can be invented.



H. R

This is very optimistic indeed. While I do agree that the (technological and economic) “systems” are both, more powerful and more vulnerable, the problem is that it is not us in the sense of a political subject who is powerful: Late-modern society lacks both, a vision of where it wants to go – how we want to live and who we want to be – and the political institutions which we could use to shape or steer social and technological change: There is no political subject that could control anything. So, I am afraid that rather than regaining political autonomy, we will have to become trans-human: We will have to improve our minds and bodies technologically to keep up with the pace of flows around us. Hence, no one can tell what the final destination we are heading for will look like. Certainly, we are not in control.

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Hartmut Rosa

Sociologue

Hartmut Rosa, a German sociologist and philosopher teaches, at the Friedrich-Schiller University at Jena (Chair of General and Theoretical Sociology). 2010 saw the publication of a French translation of his book *Beschleunigung. Die Veränderung der Zeitstrukturen in der Moderne* (Acceleration: a social critique of time), in which he analyses the dissolution of democracy, and in particular how it has been swept away by the tidal wave of acceleration.



Michel Lussault

Géographe

Michel Lussault is a geographer and Professor of Urban Studies at Lyon University (École Normale Supérieure). He is also the director of the Institut Français d'Éducation and the author of L'avènement du monde – Essai sur l'habitation humaine de la terre (The Advent of the World – an essay on human habitation of the Earth), published in 2013.

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To cite this publication :

Hartmut Rosa et Michel Lussault (31 March 2014), « What are the effects of the acceleration of social rhythms? », Préparer la transition mobile. Consulté le 17 May 2025, URL: <https://forumviesmobiles.org/en/crossed-questions/2261/what-are-effects-acceleration-social-rhythms>

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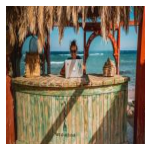
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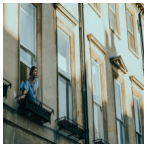
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